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# Community, Coalition, and Culture: Conceptualizing the 29th Annual Ohio Lesbian Festival

Anna Avery  
[ava12@ziips.uakron.edu](mailto:ava12@ziips.uakron.edu)

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**Community, Coalition, and Culture:**  
**Conceptualizing the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Ohio Lesbian Festival**

Anna Avery

Department of Anthropology

Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

This paper was born from a desire to put into words the formations<sup>1</sup> by which women who have been marginalized on the basis of their attraction to other women build a sense of community and companionship with one another. The communities that LGBT women make, the spaces in which we purportedly thrive, are a part of the way in which a cultural identity is both constructed and sustained. If defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors that members of a group use to form a worldview, it follows that a strong sense of shared identity can result in the formation of culture. In this instance, I am interested in understanding what formations take place in lesbian festival spaces that impact cultural identity in lesbians as well as other sapphic<sup>2</sup> women. The purpose of this work is to create a comprehensive understanding of how events and those who participate in them reproduce or reinvent systems of value, communication, and hierarchies. The nature of this research may seem circular; this is because it is an iterative process in which people create communities that shape individual identities, which then proceed to further shape the community. It is a cyclical process by which culture forms—the impact of the individual on the group holds as much weight as the impact of the group on the individual. To accomplish this research, I attended the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Ohio Lesbian Festival (OLF) to collect observational and interview data. This festival, run by the nonprofit group Lesbians Benefitting the Arts (LBA), originally decided to use the word “lesbian” in the title as a “radical decision...in a time when it was not socially acceptable or generally safe to do so.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is open to women of all sexualities as a space created

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the processes by which individuals both learn and create a system of shared norms and practices.

<sup>2</sup> An increasingly common adjective used by the community to identify LGBT women as a group, deriving from Sappho, the poet on the island of Lesbos, Greece that inspired the term “lesbian” with her lyrical poetry dedicated to her love for women.

<sup>3</sup> Murphy, Heather. n.d. “About Us.” Ohio Lesbian Festival. Accessed January 27, 2019. <https://ohiolba.org/about-us/>.

by lesbians with the intent to foster community and create connections, founded on the premise that “lesbians and queer womyn need opportunities and spaces to recognize each other, to define our culture, to find our own strengths, and to be empowered.”

Focusing on formations that directly impact festival experience as well as the unspoken rules that are unconsciously followed, I will be exploring the ins and outs of OLF’s community. From the impact that location has on festival design and accessibility, to acceptable (and unacceptable) modes of communication between attendees, and the often underrecognized inequalities that are present, this paper will explore how sapphic women at OLF conceptualize cultural ideals and put them into practice. The goal of my research is to clarify the fundamental processes by which lesbians and other sapphic women shape, and in turn, are shaped by their festival communities.

### **Positionality**

Long before I considered conducting original research on the subject, I considered myself a part of this community. I find looking back that if asked at the time to define the word, I would have struggled with an answer: something along the lines of “a group in which I feel cared for and understood,” or “people organized around a common cause.” My past self would most certainly have referred to the “lesbian community” and the “LGBT community” respectively. The nuances of positionality, how my own experiences and identities affect my worldview as well as the power I have over others, was something I had not considered as an adolescent. I understood privilege and oppression well enough to form opinions on a variety of subjects, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia, but the power dynamics and systems that function within oppressed groups were considerably more perplexing. Now, as someone with considerably more education and experience in the subject, the need to address my own positionality regarding my

research is clear to me. Due to this research involving a community I consider myself a part of, the blurring of emic and etic<sup>4</sup> perspectives is inevitable.

Though I had never attended any lesbian-specific events before OLF 2018, nor had any experience in women-only spaces, I held prior experiential knowledge of some LGBT (particularly LGBT women's) culture. I have identified as a lesbian for some years now, though before that I thought myself bisexual, and for much of my adolescence I was "unquestionably straight." Despite eventually establishing myself as a part of LGBT life, the historical significance of many things was lost on me. I grew up in a white, working-class family where the only gay "relative" was an unrelated cousin of a second cousin whom I had never met. We did not learn about LGBT issues in school. The first time I ever heard gay people mentioned was when an officer who had been presenting on an anti-drug policy to a group of third-graders informed us that "girls can't marry girls," which was extremely upsetting for reasons eight-year-old me wasn't able to identify. It was not until high school that I had parsed it all out, and then not until college that I began to really understand what I now consider to be my own cultural history. It became clear to me that even with all the available literature and academic examination, there was very little comprehensively insightful research on sapphic women's lives.

## **Background Literature**

In my search for journals and books on LGBT identity as women experience it, I came across several studies by names such as Judith Butler (author of *Gender Trouble*, a work from 1990 that still leads discussions on gender identity and sex today with its controversial stances<sup>5</sup>), Bonnie J. Morris (frequent contributor to the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*), and Victoria Bromley

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<sup>4</sup> Emic being an inside perspective and etic being an outside perspective

<sup>5</sup> Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

*(Don't Call me That! Feminism and other F words)*. Authors such as these aided in my understanding of some of the fundamental building blocks of lesbian festivals, namely the different feminist waves and what forms of activism were born of them. "Waves" refer to the dominant periods in which certain styles of feminist thinking were popularized; there is thought to be three confirmed waves as of current, although a debate on whether we are moving into a "fourth wave" is topical in many activist circles. First wave feminism, which began in the 1800s and is thought to have "finished" by the early to mid-1900s, was focused on some of the more fundamental rights of women. Women's suffrage is the most recognized result of this early feminist line of thought, although focus on access to education and ability to work outside of the home were also important campaigns of the time. Second wave feminism was popularized in the 1960s and 70s after a short time of inactivity in feminist circles brought upon by the winning of the (white) women's vote, the great depression, and wartime. It built onto some of the earlier activist ideas, particularly that of the working women, while also shifting focus to issues such as forced gender roles, reproductive health, domestic violence (a term not coined until this time), and general inequality in opportunity. The third wave is considerably harder to define in terms of time, as it is arguably still ongoing; as a contemporary movement, the focus here lies on the redefining of what it means to be a "woman," the differences between sex and gender, and more understanding of how factors such as race and class affect societal experience.<sup>6</sup> Recently, it is becoming more and more common to assume that we have entered a new period, the fourth wave. Thought to have started somewhere around 2012, this wave focuses strongly on repercussion to gender-based violence, the uplifting of marginalized voices in feminist spaces, and the impact of social media on mobilization of activism.

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<sup>6</sup> Dicker, Rory C. 2008. "A history of U.S. Feminisms." Berkley: Seal Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.

The second wave of feminism is what gave birth to women's festivals, with the public questioning of gender roles and sexuality lining up quite well with the explosion of LGBT activism after the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Starting in 1974 and continuing in present day, lesbian festivals were started as both a safe space for sexual minority women away from men and as coalition spaces tackling social and political conflict, while simultaneously centering the work and experiences of lesbians above all else (something that was often otherwise ignored in both heterosexual feminist spaces as well as many LGBT spaces).<sup>7</sup> While most certainly not without conflict of their own, these festivals became a unique response to cultural conditions of multifaceted marginalization. One of the smaller yet incredibly pervasive ways that the refusal of men (often conflated with the male sex) manifested was the removal of their presence even within the language used. Several variations of the word "woman" have been proposed as ways to remove the presence of the "man." Womyn is one of the more frequently used substitutions, OLF being one of many festivals that uses it as the official term, while others such as "womon," "wom\*n," "wimmin (plural)," "womban<sup>8</sup>," and "womxn<sup>9</sup>" are also widely accepted. From here forward, I will be using the term "womyn" in accordance with OLF's standard.

## Methods

After building a significant foundational knowledge of the subject, my next step towards the finalization of my research was the planning and subsequent execution of fieldwork. Partaking in CITI training and receiving IRB approval for project methodology came first, the certifications for which are attached in the appendix at the end of this paper. Attending OLF

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<sup>7</sup> Morris, Bonnie J. 2005. "Negotiating Lesbian Worlds." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9 (1-2): 55–62. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v09n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v09n01_05).

<sup>8</sup> In reference to the womb

<sup>9</sup> A more recent attempt to be inclusionary to transgender individuals, although it has also been criticized for being othering.

2018 all four days of its enactment, September 20-23<sup>rd</sup>, provided me with the opportunity to gather as much information as possible in a very short window of time, as far as working in the field goes. My main methods of data collection were observational, in addition to 12 semi-structured interviews and several informal interviews that took place throughout the weekend. Participant observation proved to be the most effective method of gathering data in this situation, a technique that focuses on immersion as a way to effectively internalize complex systems of interaction<sup>10</sup>. The collection of data was performed by me and my field assistant, Caitlin Kohler, who was included in all forms of the informed consent and was given limited access to the finalized data. During the festival I sectioned out three for each of day to dedicate to the interview process, which consisted of myself and anywhere from one to three womyn sitting down in a quiet location, usually near the entrance of the park. These interviews generally lasted around 10-15 minutes, aside from two that lasted closer to 30 minutes. In total, 17 individuals participated in the semi-structured interviews. Each conversation was recorded and then transcribed, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts during this process. The 11 total questions were separated into three categories: demographics, community, and personal relationships. A detailed record of the interview questions can also be found in the appendix. Demographically, interviewees ranged from the ages of 22 to 65. Sexual orientations reported nine individuals identified as lesbians, five queer, and one unspecified. Two individuals reported their gender as nonbinary or fluid, the rest either did not specify or identified as womyn. Three individuals reported their religious affiliation, two of which being Jewish and the other as a Dianic priestess. Additional data from the survey functioned mostly as qualitative anecdotes.

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<sup>10</sup>Guest, Greg, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. 55 City Road, London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013. doi: 10.4135/9781506374680.



## Lesbian Festivals and Land Use

The 29<sup>th</sup> annual OLF took place at Hoover YMCA Park, just outside of Columbus, Ohio. This was the third location move in the past three years, and so the land was new to even the experienced festies<sup>11</sup>, a fact that several womyn were keen to note. Location and space usage are inseparable from symbolic and literal intention in any public celebration, and they hold a lot of importance in womyn's communities historically—in the early 1970s a movement called “lesbian separatism” was born; the idea of lesbian (and oftentimes bisexual) womyn needing their own physical location away from men and straight womyn. Though now the positionality of lesbian separatism is often disparaged in feminist spaces for being “utopian” and “unachievable,” it started a movement that still echoes today<sup>12</sup>. The movement of sapphic womyn into communities of their own making has affected the way lesbian culture has formed over time, allowing for the creation of different social roles and expectations. From the very start of these womyn-only spaces, there has been struggle regarding the accessing of land, whether that be finding preexisting woman-only land or renting campgrounds from oftentimes homophobic owners.<sup>13</sup> Setbacks in environment can determine the length of the festival as well as how often it occurs; most will return annually if they find themselves successful. Occasionally, a permanent living situation will pop up—various communes have been established (and dissolved), as well as folk schools, living-learning communities, camps, and simple neighborhoods for those unable to fully isolate themselves. While there are similarities that lie in how sapphic womyn interact with each other and their environment, each separate

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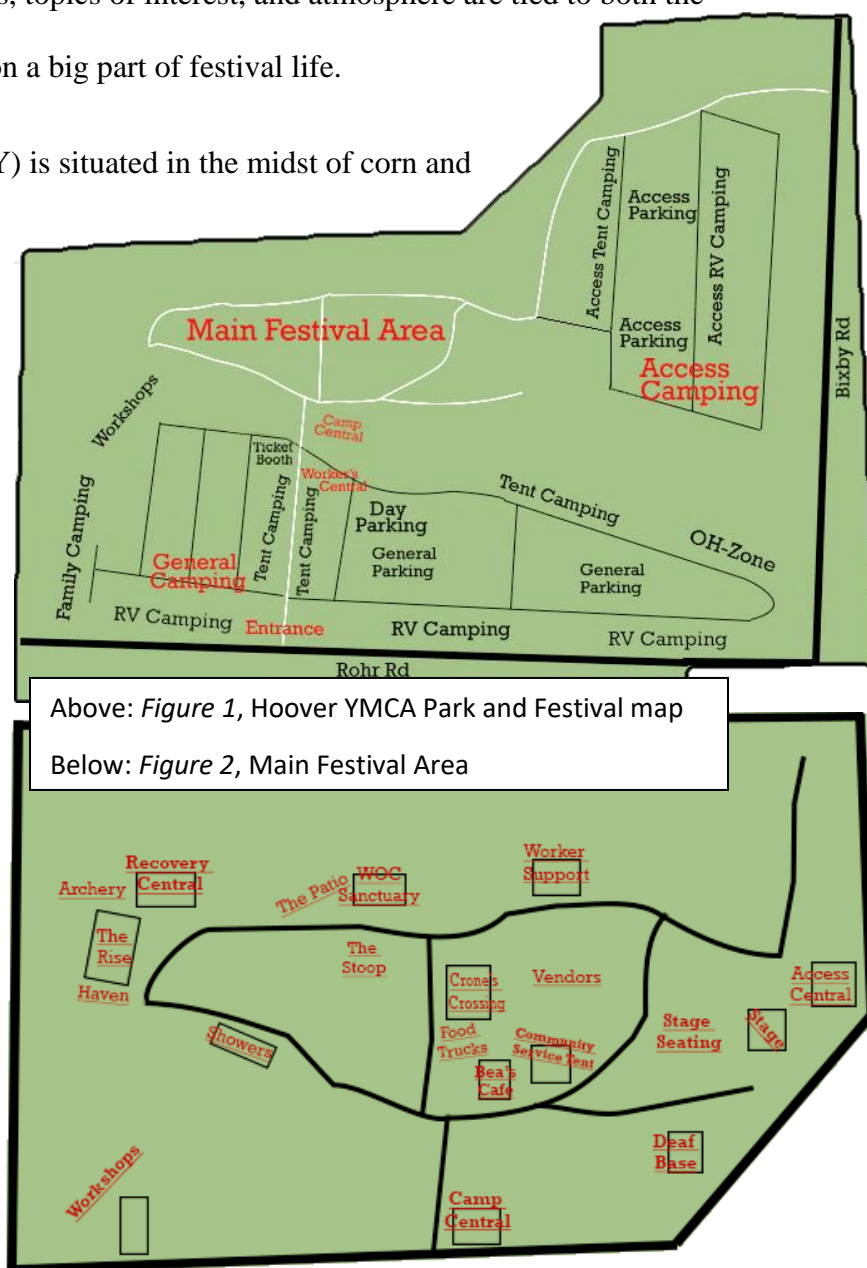
<sup>11</sup> Festival-goers, a term used within festival spaces to denote non-staff attendees.

<sup>12</sup> Enszer, Julie R. 2016. “‘How to Stop Choking to Death’: Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20 (2): 180–96. doi:10.1080/10894160.2015.1083815

<sup>13</sup> Morris, Bonnie J. 2005. “Negotiating Lesbian Worlds.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9 (1-2): 55–62. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v09n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v09n01_05).

community is home to its own distinct ordinance and customs. In Joyce Cheney's *Lesbian Land*, several tell their own stories of womyn-only communities; including vastly different rules, beliefs, and values alongside different uses of space, land, finances, and goals<sup>14</sup>. Each community comes with its own conflicts, as well, whether they be about sustainability, presence of male children, or the recurring debate concerning the inclusion (or exclusion) of transgender womyn. All of these behavioral standards, topics of interest, and atmosphere are tied to both the leaders and the land itself, making location a big part of festival life.

Hoover YMCA Park (or Hoover Y) is situated in the midst of corn and wheat fields in a typical Ohio fashion. As shown in figure 1, the entrance to the park is a small driveway turning from Rohr road that goes straight down the middle of the fields and then stops, allowing for parking space in the grass fields on either side. This vector was used as a one-way entryway throughout the duration of the festival, with the only exit option being to drive through the lots and onto one of two small roads that ran perpendicular to the entrance, unless using the accessibility parking lot. The festival



<sup>14</sup> Cheney, Joyce. 1985. *Lesbian Land*. Minneapolis, MN: Word Weavers.

offered space for tent camping to the left of the entrance as well as further across the field to the right. RV campers had two separate areas, one of which acted as a wall between the road and tent campers. Accessible lodging was available further into the park, in the main festival area (figure 2). The choice of accommodations and their location was significant in several ways, particularly for those in tents. The two separate locations—main camping and the Oh-zone (consider the “party” camping)—each designated a different nightlife experience. General camping was (intended to be) the family-friendly, quiet night time area, alongside the family camping site running alongside. It had earlier quiet hours, starting at 10:00pm, that were to be enforced more strictly. This is where most of the crones<sup>15</sup> and mothers with children would camp, blending into the family camping area. It was also where I decided to stay. During the first night it became clear that this camping area would be no quieter than the Oh-zone. One of the womyn staying at the Oh-zone commented to me on the oddity of the situation after the first night. “It’s usually partying all night here, but this year it’s been oddly quiet. It sounds like there’s more going on in general [camping].”

The discomfort towards the intentional change in space use did not surprise me. Particularly at a festival where there have been multiple intentional changes in location and general setup in the last few years, consistency is something sought after. Crew members working the festival told me several times throughout the weekend that they were actively trying to bring familiarity to the festival, channeling some of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest), a festival that was started in 1976 and is well-loved by festival goers despite rife with

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<sup>15</sup> Referring to the seniors/elders in the community, crones are generally treated with great respect as those who laid the foundations for sapphic culture and activism.

controversy over a wombyn-born-wombyn policy<sup>16</sup>. Building from this known and respected space while still being a separate, distinctly individual experience is one of the goals that the LBA strives towards with OLF. The set-up of designated areas for a wide range of activities throughout the park accomplished this, largely reminiscent of the no longer active Michfest. One of the areas most actively compared to the defunct festival was the previously mentioned Oh-zone, which according to the staff was named as the “Ohio” zone but is known more colloquially to festies as a reference to the putative frequency of sexual activity taking place in the area. This camping section was where those who wouldn’t mind a bit (or a lot) of noise stayed, as it was intended to be where womyn gathered to talk and be merry throughout the night. The Oh-zone was reminiscent of Michfest’s “Twilight Zone,” I was told several times throughout the festival. This year, the weather made it difficult for bonfires, one of the more favored activities in the Oh-zone. Whether or not that is the reason for the quiet, it is hard to say. I did end up as a part of a fireside party on the final night, and while it began with only a few of us trying to coax sparks into flame, the result was a large number of womyn huddled around, several of whom brought seating to share. This was received with excitement from many womyn staying in the area. “Finally,” one said to me, “something is actually happening.” She drew in her friends, and in that fashion, the number of people around the fire continued to grow late into the night.

While the Oh-zone failed to be the lively night-life camping site most of the weekend, the other locations functioned as they were intended, give or take some complications caused by festies. Situated in the main festival area (figure 2), the spaces where programming took place stayed busy throughout the weekend. Here there were the locations dedicated to learning, such

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<sup>16</sup> Trigilio, Jo. 2016. “Complicated and Messy Politics of Inclusion: Michfest and the Boston Dyke March.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20 (2): 234–50. doi:10.1080/10894160.2016.1083835.

as Workshop Central, where subjects from racism to drumming to sex were discussed. More physical activities were varied depending on the type—there was a space specifically for archery, and just a few steps away from the Haven, which offered yoga, art, and other activities meant to alleviate stress. Outside of the RISE, one of the permanent park buildings, the large patch of grass was used to hold an arm-wrestling competition. Inside the RISE building, the Friday and Saturday night dance parties were held. It was also home to breakfasts, lunches, dinners, bingo, and a particularly memorable folk-jam session with Lizzie and the Yeehaw Gang. The sectioning-off of different locations for different activities did not separate festies; I would argue that it was in fact more cohesive in this fashion. It allowed festies to attend to what they wanted or needed with ease, while simultaneously still being a part of the whole. As the main festival area took place around a large oval-shaped walkway surrounding a field, most of the specialized areas were in close proximity to each other, some even bleeding together. The marketplace, for example, was just beyond the stage where performers could be found all throughout the festival, making it easy to be a part of the concerts and shows while also shopping at womyn-owned businesses.

Although many sites were designated for programming, there were also those spaces in which only specific groups of womyn were allowed. The Crone Central cabin provided a well-lit, air-conditioned space for the older womyn to retreat to, and the Deaf Base gave hard of hearing and Deaf womyn a space to rest and converse with each other. There was also a small tent near the RISE called Recovery Central, for womyn recovering from substance abuse. This area was the only in the festival where the presence of mind-altering substances such as alcohol were not allowed, though it was interesting to me that it was situated next to an area where partaking in substance use within a party setting was common. One of the more controversial of

these venues was the Sanctuary: self-described as a “haven for womyn of color (WOC)/indigenous womyn.” Though other exclusive spaces faced little to no negativity and resistance from those outside, the Sanctuary had several instances of white festies trying to either sneak their way in or walk confidently right through the doors. While some reportedly didn’t realize their transgression (despite the large wooden sign right by the entrance), others argued and fought about their right to go wherever they please. To prevent this reprisal, the Sanctuary was given two connected areas. Directly in front of the entrance sat the Stoop, where womyn of color and their allies would spend time while simultaneously preventing the other womyn from entering the space, providing the opportunity to create conversations surrounding the need for a WOC/Indigenous space. While these explanations would occasionally be met with understanding, it was not uncommon for the denied party to leave unhappy. Though not granted access to the Sanctuary, it is not as if non-WOC/indigenous womyn did not have a place to share. Beside the Sanctuary sat the “patio,” a space that welcomed white womyn welcome to join in events and discuss the topics of race and racism, as well as simply spend their time.

The staff tent, Worker’s Central, and the ticket tent were positioned along the entrance road, making it easily accessible to anyone who had already arrived while also giving staff the ability to control the entrance of new festies. The Community Tent, where those attending would go to sign up for community work shifts as well as for various needs to be met, sat right inside the main festival area, bordering on the marketplace. This was a high-volume location, therefore making it easier to remind walkerbys of the need for volunteers to take part in the community work shifts. Locating the less populated staff tents near areas of frequent traffic deliberately lead festies to acknowledge what otherwise may have been ignored, working in the favor of the festival workers who must attempt to ensure that shifts are filled, and jobs get done.

All of the sites distributed across Hoover Y formed OLF, and subsequently influence the atmosphere and intracommunity relationships I observed in my research.

### **Community: Behavior and Communication**

Having a sense of shared identity and purpose is part of what makes a group of people a community. When this commonality between individuals is something that is otherwise shunned in the dominant culture, connecting with each other becomes indispensable. The support that sapphic women provide for and receive from each other is a huge factor in festival culture. One of my final interviews, a younger woman who throughout the festival showed herself to be a passionate, kind, and deeply intelligent individual, put into simple words what many others had been suggesting to me during the weekend: “It is a weight off the shoulders, but also acknowledging that there was a weight there in the first place, and it feels safe.” Safety is a word that made its way into every interview, both formal and informal, and it was present around every turn. It is something that the womyn who attend OLF seem to be distinctly aware of; the difference between outside and inside. Those who had been attending festivals for many years, sometimes decades, all spoke of a time of security and of solidarity. Those newer to the experience described feeling like they had only just realized the pressures of being a woman in society, especially with regards to non-normative sexual orientations, once given a weekend away from it. Talking about patriarchal power structures with others was incredibly commonplace—some womyn referred to it as therapeutic, the sharing of pain and struggle that each sapphic woman goes through by being a member of an ostracized minority. One of the workshops held on the first full day was titled *Trauma Informed Communities*<sup>17</sup>, focusing on

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<sup>17</sup> This model has been gaining traction for the last several years, often used specifically for impoverished urban communities.

how to grow as a community while simultaneously acknowledging and working with the traumas that those within have experienced. While this was only a one-hour discussion circle, the reality of a shared trauma persisted day by day. Several womyn admitted either to me personally or openly in my presence that they had dealt with sexual assault, and that OLF was where they felt safe enough to simply exist. Others spoke of abuse from family, friends, and significant others. Most of the womyn I spoke to had experienced forms of street harassment, sexism, and homophobia. This discussion both provided support and highlighted the presence of shared traumas across the remaining days. For these individuals, festivals are where they go to escape, to heal, and to connect.

Connection, however, is a word weighted with countless assumptions and connotations. How do we form connections with each other? When speaking on what lesbian communities have done (and still need to do), Elana Dykewomon wrote: “Without homeland, without a national food, with only sexual affinity, a glimmer of a shared sense of humor and a few common points of outrage, lesbians have managed whole lifetimes of support, interconnection, politics, ethics, art.”<sup>18</sup> Womyn who attend OLF are given the opportunity to partake in group-oriented activities that range from incredibly serious political discussions about the future of lesbian festivals to therapeutic music sessions to trance-inducing spiritual rituals. These accomplishments do not happen overnight, nor do they happen over the course of a single festival weekend, but they do make their appearance. These activities serve to reinforce and maintain community mindedness. In a situation where the prominent oppressive factors of homophobia and sexism are no longer in play, social and personal expectations take new form.

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<sup>18</sup> Dykewomon, Elana. 2005. “Lesbian Quarters: On Building Space, Identity, Institutional Memory and Resources.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9 (1/2): 31–43. doi:10.1300/J155v09n01pass:[]03.



According to activist and philosopher María Lugones, “Lesbian community is the context in which lesbians create new value.”<sup>19</sup> Cultural systems of value determine acceptable behavior, modes of communication, and common practices (from ritual to recreation). These values are present on both casual and systematic levels, and they aid in determining how community members interact with each other and the environment around them. Several times throughout the festival, I was shown that helpfulness and openness are of great value to this community. One individual told me and my assistant, “If you need anything, ask. The land provides.” “The Land,” I now presume after the fact, was once more a reference to Michfest, which was colloquially titled just that. The admonition was not empty. Womyn figuratively (and sometimes literally) stumbled over themselves to help out when someone was in need. From small tasks to substantial favors, if something needed to be done you could count on several womyn stepping up. This kind of behavior helps to create the strong sense of trust among attendees, building institutional confidence in the “goodness” of lesbian community. At first, I was under the impression that this trust was ignorant of any problems or domineering power structures in place; I had seen several instances of disagreement, and even some imperious behavior. However, a crone who had sat down with me allowed me to see this seemingly unending faith in a different light:

“I honestly don’t think that we all do get along. I think that it’s really important to remember that this is a coalition space as well as a celebration space. I think that there’s a lot of different opinions, but being respectful to each other and hearing each other’s work and owning your own shit [...] is I think key to this. I think shared experiences

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<sup>19</sup> Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes—Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. 189. Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

connect us, knowing that there was always somebody who was at the same point as you were, [the] elders are really, really remembering that and remembering the help that you would have wanted or needed or the respect that you would have wanted at that particular point in your life.”

Her words shifted my focus. Rather than focusing on differences and divisions, she advised I trust in the whole as a foundation from which coalition, community, and subsequently culture is built. Acknowledgement of strain and management of conflict play a part as well, particularly regarding the trust of those on the receiving end of intercommunity power imbalances—details of which I will elaborate on page 21, where I focus specifically on these hierarchies.

Assurance in the broader lesbian community comes from certain behavioral expectations that determine modes of communication and appropriate forms of interaction. The rules of engagement in sapphic spaces are significantly different from outside conduct, and woman-only festival spaces amplify these differences. Generally, the boundary-making practices determining communicative rules here are based on the same main elements found elsewhere, simply reconstructed in a way that fits the cultural goals sought out by womyn creating their own communities. In his book *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, Andreas Wimmer suggests that there are three main actors in determining boundaries: institutional rules, access to resources to pursue variable boundary-making interests, and networks of alliances through which strategies are put into practice.<sup>20</sup> In terms of institutional rules, the OLF website has some of the expectations in written form as “guiding principles.” General guidelines to follow are based simply on the mutual respect of difference even in disagreement; officially,

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<sup>20</sup> Wimmer, Andreas. *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199927371.003.0001.

OLF expects attendees to use the correct pronouns for others, stay away from words that are “traditionally used to silence, hurt, undercut, or erase,<sup>21</sup>” and actively make the effort to acknowledge and unlearn behaviors rooted in oppressive structures. These are rules that have been present for several years, although recent additions to the site in 2019 have clarified details further than previously specified. Following these baseline values, the womyn at OLF have proceeded to bring their own individual communicatory designs from both personal and already-existent sapphic positions. Generally, those who have seniority in terms of festival experience have more connections with community members as well as leaders and are given more heed in discussions on how attendees “should” act and interact. For OLF, this means a strong sense of openness—when first arriving at the festival, newcomers tend to struggle with the idea of walking up to just anyone and starting a conversation, but the willingness of festies and staff to welcome, help, or simply chat with womyn they have never met before is one of the first things that comes up. It is perfectly acceptable to join in with groups of people, ask questions, and in some cases even join in on already existing conversations. Attendees who were strangers only ten minutes past may openly discuss emotional subjects such as past trauma, and initiate shows of physical affection (usually with permission). In a similar vein, conversational and emotional openness is mirrored with vulnerability in other ways, such as womyn walking around the festival with their breasts exposed, sometimes completely nude. This comes with the understanding that this is a behavior that is welcomed and, more likely than not, won’t even be commented upon. One of the long-time staff members, a womyn who had been a Michfest attendee for several years before joining OLF’s workforce, specified this as one of her favorite parts about the festival: “I love seeing all these women in the breeze with their shirts off. I love

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<sup>21</sup> Murphy, Heather. n.d. “Toward Building a Global Community.” Ohio Lesbian Festival. Accessed January 27, 2019. <https://ohiolba.org/toward-building-a-global-community/>.

walking across the festival land in the early morning, naked on my way to the shower, and witnessing women being our real selves. [...] Here I can come, I see that woman walking around with no shirt on and compliment her shoes because they're very cute." Shedding the shamefulness that is ingrained in how womyn act outside of these events, both in body and language, is encouraged throughout the festival's duration by the reorganization of boundaries and behavioral obligations.

For many womyn, displacing the patriarchal notions of bodily shame creates a sense of peace. Not worrying about how others will view your body and any expression of related subjects allows for exploration of the self, and festivals are a place of sexuality. The freedom to express this sexuality without the concern for religious or societal repercussion creates an environment that celebrates sexual identity. This sometimes manifested in sexual experiences between festies, which is a predictable result of frequent flirtations and the removal of homophobic violence as a possible outcome. It also comes in various other forms; artistic endeavors being a major expression. I was fortunate enough to be invited to a pop-up performance art demonstration by an interviewee that reflected this manifestation of sexuality in a (mostly) clear and succinct manner. The performance started with nothing but a birthday cake on the ground, but quickly escalated when the performer came out. She wore a black latex suit with the breasts and butt exposed, and her proceeding actions involved sensually grinding the latter into the cake to slow-tempo French techno music. The finale involved smearing the flattened cake and icing over the round of her posterior with three fingers, creating a pattern of lines. This was received very favorably, despite the initial confusion from many in the audience. The performer was a licensed sex therapist and educator who was celebrating her birthday that day (hence the cake). This was not the only sexually-oriented display of the weekend. Removing

the variable of objectification that would otherwise be present in a different setting made the reception profoundly different from anything I had expected. Even during parties, womyn openly danced with each other in overtly sexual ways was as normalized over as any heterosexual couple dancing in a nightclub might be; the festival space is one for a sort of openness that can be dangerous for sapphic womyn in the outside world.

Night life is deeply entwined with the sexual side of music festivals, and this holds true for womyn's festivals as well. Partying is where the previously mentioned "celebration" aspect is the strongest, and it is pervasive in its influence on cultural norms. The festival's programming offers official parties, although these are not the only celebrations that take place. The parties this past year included two dance parties, and, on Saturday night, the Sanctuary celebrated by opening its doors to the whole festival. This event attracted a lot of attention from festies, and the party itself had a high attendance. During times like this, substance use of varying sorts was frequent and recurrent, as well as incredibly open. Alcohol was present in abundance, and womyn frequently offered to share their supplies with others. Sharing of other substances, such as offering to smoke with others, was just as common. Though consent and lack of pressure on those not partaking was a strong consideration of party-goers, the overall atmosphere made it difficult for any womyn in recovery to join. At the Sanctuary's party, alcohol was provided by both those in charge of the Sanctuary and those who attended. Liquor-soaked watermelon cubes were among the available options. In one instance, a largely full bottle of home-brewed Mama Juana was given freely to someone the owner had only just met. While substance use was present throughout the festival and outside of parties, the availability and rates of use appeared to increase greatly during night time activities. This abundance isn't uncommon regarding sapphic women; a 2005 study on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs reported a significantly

higher frequency of use by lesbians and bisexual women than by heterosexual women.<sup>22</sup>

Recovery Central, the sober space, was located only a few feet away from the RISE dance parties. Although I observed festies generally acknowledging the space and respecting it by refraining from bringing substances into the area, the party culture likely made it difficult for recovering addicts.

Another omnipresent cultural formation is the role of myth in the sapphic community. While there were womyn of varying religious practices (or lack thereof) at OLF, the prevalence of pagan and goddess-centered mythology was strong. Wicca is a popular practice that sapphic womyn are drawn to, as is druidism, heathenism, and several other forms of pagan worship. The practice most inherently tied to womyn's music festivals, however, would be Dianic witchcraft. Popularized in Los Angeles by the "mother" of feminist Dianic Wiccan tradition, Zsuzsanna E. Budapest, traditions of this religion have been passed down from second wave feminists to third wave in the festival communities. Feminist witchcraft, specifically Dianic worship, gained popularity specifically among lesbians, followed by bisexual womyn and then heterosexual womyn due to its centering of the shared experience and bonds formed between them. Dianic practice has historically provided a space for allowing for womyn to reconcile with themselves and the effects of misogynistic social institutions. At OLF, there was an altar to Diana that was covered in offerings, candles, and incense. The goddess Diana is a symbol of womyn free from patriarchal constructs, and her worship is incredibly important to sapphic spaces, particularly in the case of second wave feminism. Rituals and rites of passage for womyn are a significant aspect of this particular tradition. Some of these ritualized experiences, however, have become

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<sup>22</sup> Drabble, Laurie, and Karen Trocki. "Alcohol Consumption, Alcohol-Related Problems, and Other Substance Use Among Lesbian and Bisexual Women." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 2005): 19–30. doi:10.1300/J155v09n03pass:[\_]03.

controversial in nature. Ruth Barrett, co-founder of the Temple of Diana, was in attendance at OLF 2018 as a performer. She said to me, “I would like to definitely see biological female rites of passage, where it's okay to have that here. For example, I'm a ritualist so I do rituals for Crones, for women who are coming into elderhood and it's a biological passage. It's the end of menopause. [...] And so, a person who is male embodied, it doesn't fit with that criteria and I would want a recognition of our biological reality validated and be able to be celebrated at a lesbian festival.” Male embodied here is referencing the presence of transgender women at the festival, as OLF itself has a trans-inclusive policy. Dianic witchcraft has come across a lot of backlash recently due to the perceived exclusion of transgender womyn as participants. The complications here arise in assuming that Dianic witchcraft is universally similar: some practitioners find little issue with the inclusion of trans womyn, while others are vehemently against it. These arguments are part of a larger, community-wide discourse about transgender womyn in sapphic spaces, rather than simply an issue of religious doctrine—particularly in relation to a belief system that has no canon religious texts.

## **Power Dynamics**

As with any cultural group, lesbian festival communities have hierarchical structures in place that determine what people in the group are given the most influence over the whole, and who have this power held over them in positions of secondary status. Although a common point of pride among lesbian festival spaces is in the “removal” of hierarchy and enforcement of equalization, it is more accurate to say that the standard power stratum is displaced rather than completely disassembled. Statuses like class, race, and ability still affect how a festie is viewed by those around them, and even gender is not completely removed from the equation due to

varying forms of identity and expression in sapphic womyn. A major part of the perceived unity in festival spaces is the way in which conflicts that result from these power imbalances are resolved. Conflict resolution at OLF was considered not only the responsibility of the staff and board, but of the festies and volunteers, and strategies focused on mediation between both parties. However, this mediation tends to lean towards the benefit of the majority, forcing minority members of the community to fight simultaneously harder and in a calmer manner for their side to be heard. This is partly due to the importance of elders in lesbian community; crones who have been in festival space since the beginning or near that are generally deferred to as the most knowledgeable, leading to a confirmation bias along the lines of “it worked for us up to now, so it will continue to work.” This serves to reinforce the status quo whether intentionally or otherwise.

As previously mentioned, there are several factors involved in the stratification of privilege in festival culture. One of the most apparent of these was brought to my attention before even arriving at OLF’s campground: class. To attend OLF, you must be able to pay for the tickets. A one-day pass ordered prior to the festival for the 2019 event is \$75. Attendees who plan on staying for more than one day are met with a jump from that to \$120 for two days, \$140 for three, and \$145 for the full four-day pass. At the gate, the prices are raised to \$155 for four days. There *is* an option for a reduced rate ticket, but this is available only to womyn on SSI/SSDI or those who are unable to work due to medical necessity. Otherwise, an option to have your ticket refunded as a festival worker is available but requires an up-front payment that will later be returned. These prices are determined by the cost of the festival rather than an attempt to create profit, but as a result the attendance is slanted towards those with disposable income. Those who are not as fortunate to be able to afford a weekend off for an expensive



getaway without trouble told me they “save up all year to attend.” For them, the festival is a necessary escape from the daily toils of the overworked and underprivileged. Saving up for tickets, however, isn’t the only monetary commitment to the event one can or will make. The marketplace, for example, is full of stalls at which you can buy various forms of goods; lotions and soaps, musical instruments, clothing, wallets, books, and any other product a local womyn (and often lesbian)-owned business may be selling. The marketplace is a central part of both the celebratory aspect and the coalition work, supporting small businesses through materiality and appealing to the popularity of attaining mementos to represent festies’ time at OLF. However, in addition to the marketplace, there was a “trading bazaar” event that took place in the field centrally located in the main festival area. This event was a freely organized way for festies to present their own goods and services and trade them with others, which took money completely out of the equation and allowed individuals to participate based on individual desires and needs rather than financial gains. Of interest to me was the difference in attitude between marketplace and the bazaar: according to participants, the bazaar rarely, if ever, had a trade refused, and was generally entrenched in willingness to work with each other, including providing their produce for free in some cases. The marketplace, however, saw some more trouble in terms of womyn feeling entitled to space and service. One of the vendors who sat down with me walked me through a story in which this was evident:

“We were super late opening, and a friend came to visit through the back; while we're helping them, we're putting stuff in and womyn kept coming into my booth and shopping anyway [...] Older women with money repeatedly came into my booth because there's a privilege that they don't have to ask. I don't know if we actually see sometimes the

privilege that we take with each other and with other people. So even in these spaces there's still privilege, and it sucks, but yeah.”

This was one of several examples I was given throughout the festival of class privilege coming into play, leading womyn to behave in a way that assumes their status based on financial ability, whether they realize it or not. In fact, several womyn who had described their lifestyles of living in RVs that travel around the country from festival to festival as something standardly achievable, encouraging others to drop what ailed them and “take a year off,” or something to that effect. For them, this is a completely reasonable form of advice in how to come to peace with yourself and the world around you; for many others, it is a frustrating sign of a privileged lifestyle with little understanding as to the troubles less fortunate are facing.

On the other hand, despite class being a determining factor in how festival life is experienced by a festie, it is a relatively unintended consequence with very little genuinely deliberate vindication towards those who don't fit the mold. This ceases to be the case when it comes to other underprivileged womyn, particularly when it comes to race. Though Lesbians Benefitting the Arts' “Toward Building a Global Community” statement officially condemns racism and commits to appropriate punishment, racist ideas, words, and actions are still present both online and on festival grounds. This poses the question of how womyn who are aware of their own oppressions fail to see how they contribute to others'. Patricia Hill Collins suggested in her chapter “Towards a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection” that “white feminists routinely point with confidence to their oppression as women but resist seeing how much their White skin privileges them...in essence, each group identifies with the type of oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and

classifies all other types as being of lesser importance.”<sup>23</sup> For those who perpetuate racism in a space that has the goal of universal equality of womyn, it may be that their own position is seen as far more deserving of recognition as the forefront issue in sapphic spaces such as OLF. The consideration that race is inherently tied to gender equality is something that was discussed in several different situations during the festival, not least of which being during one of the workshop classes on how to combat racial discrimination as white womyn. The issue that arises in the situation where race conversations are optional workshops is that the womyn who need to attend the most are the ones who don’t. It is those who are already aware of their privilege and are willing to actively listen and learn that attend, and while this helps to aid in the deliberate unlearning of institutionalized racism it does not do much to prevent those who are intentionally ignorant from continuing to act upon it. The dissidence towards the OLF standard anti-racist policy has a profound effect on how the womyn of color, particularly black womyn of color, experience the festival. The Sanctuary is there to aid in giving WOC/Indigenous womyn a space away from white womyn, where there isn’t the worry of encountering racially motivated harassment. Interviewees referred to it as “a place of healing.” As previously mentioned, even this space is under constant scrutiny from white womyn who struggle with understanding why it is necessary. When discussing those who attempt to enter the Sanctuary despite the rules, one interviewee explained: “I feel like you're not going to get us out of our safe spaces, you're not going to leave your safe spaces, but you need to understand why we go [to the Sanctuary]. We understand why you're here, you know, in this space because we're here, but we have to be there in here. And so you have to understand why, you don't have to go in there to understand.” As a black womyn, this interviewee had experienced one of the examples of racism present at OLF

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<sup>23</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection." *Race, Sex & Class* 1, no. 1 (1993): 25-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41680038>.

only just the night before, which resulted in a very emotional conversation regarding what WOC have to go through not only in their daily lives, but also in a space that is meant to be an escape from that reality. Harassment by white womyn is punished when possible, but the problem lies in how to prevent this from being an issue in the first place.

Another group that is frequently met with discrimination by festies are transgender womyn. As previously mentioned, it is against festival rules to intentionally undermine or misgender another attendee; yet transgender womyn at the festival are met with frequent disdain and accusatory words. Referred to as men invading womyn's space, some vendors in the marketplace even proudly displayed anti-trans memorabilia. Often referring to cisgender womyn as "natal womyn" or "natural womyn," one tent was decked out in several images of vaginas with the slogan "women are female, stop the lies." Although the frequent discourse between the lesbian community and the trans community is often framed in wholly negative terms, transgender womyn have been a part of lesbian spaces since long before the "wars" started and continue to find a place with many cisgender sapphic womyn. One instance of this solidarity lies in the response to Michfest's "womyn-born-womyn" policy, which resulted in performers refusing to play at the festival as well as a declining attendance in support of inclusion. Genny Beeman and Mickey Eliason discussed this particular event, and the overall issue of trans versus cis lesbians, in their article "The intersection of trans women and lesbian identities, communities, and movements." Though exclusion of transgender womyn began in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the idea of butch and femme identities "replicating heterosexuality" which lead to transgender womyn being outed as "heterosexual men" as well, they theorize that the fear of

transgender womyn in lesbian spaces arose out of the feeling of invisibility lesbians face as a part of the wider LGBT community.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Lesbian festival communities are complex cultural systems that lesbians and other sapphic womyn create to reflect values and create customs suited to their needs. In turn, the communities grow and impact the way in which identity forms for these womyn. The cyclical nature of the influence that community and individual identity have on each other allows for a festival to both meet the needs of the minority group it serves, while simultaneously providing space for change through coalition. The conceptualization that individuals have of what lesbian culture should be is put into practice through community organization, which relies on cooperation between individuals despite differences in opinion—some of which leading to more conflict than others. The way in which the problems that arise are resolved plays an enormous part in the success (or failure) of a festival. OLF puts an emphasis on dealing with conflict resulting from several variables, from external elements such as geographic location and land availability, to internal elements such as individual disagreements and disregarded rules. By focusing on managing dissension and other problems that arise, cultural processes are able to take place in an organic manner.

OLF provides a space for womyn once a year to gather and put effort into community, culture, and coalition. Providing a physical domain for lesbians and other sapphic womyn holds a vital importance as the frequency and popularity of businesses catering towards us continues to

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<sup>24</sup> Beemyn, Genny, and Mickey Eliason. 2015. "The Intersections of Trans Women and Lesbian Identities, Communities, and Movements': An Introduction." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20 (1): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1076232>.

shrink, leaving many without a tangible community to turn towards. While online settings provide connection despite distance, the opportunity to take part in an environment geared towards a minority group in a healthy and productive manner is essential to the wellbeing of those who suffer from discrimination. Many womyn fear the loss of sapphic culture and support systems due to the decline in community space. Though OLF is only one of the lesbian festivals still running, it can be difficult for younger womyn who struggle with class to attend. Similarly, those who ally themselves with the trans community are often under the assumption that *all* lesbian festivals have anti-trans policies due to a frequent association of the word “lesbian” with trans-exclusionary radical feminism. It is important, moving forward, to acknowledge that each festival is an amalgamation of the ideals of sapphic womyn from a wide array of backgrounds coming together as one to coalesce and fight for a better way of life.

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

#### Demographics:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What kind of identities do you feel are important to understanding who you are?
3. (If not given) What is your age/ethnicity/sexual orientation/gender

#### Community:

4. Tell me about a time you felt like you were really part of a community?
  - a. Was this at OLF? If not, do you feel like a part of the OLF community?
5. What do you think is important in maintaining a positive group dynamic?
6. What types of people do you feel have the biggest part in decision making at this festival?
7. In what ways do you feel connected to other members of your/this community?
8. Describe something you love about OLF?
9. What is something you'd like to see change or be added to this festival in the future?

#### Personal Relationships:

10. In romantic relationships, what is something important your partner should know to effectively communicate with you?
  - a. Does this differ in friendships?
11. What kinds of people do you feel you form closer relationships with?



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## NOTICE OF APPROVAL

Date: 9/19/18

To: Anna Avery  
Department of Anthropology

From: Katie Watkins, IRB Administrator

IRB Number: 20171004

Title: Survey of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in Ages 18 to 25

Approval Date: 9/19/18

Thank you for submitting your Change Request for review. Your changes do not represent an increase in risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

- ☐ **Exemption 1** – Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.
- ☒ **Exemption 2** – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.
- ☐ **Exemption 3** – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.
- ☐ **Exemption 4** – Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.
- ☐ **Exemption 5** – Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.
- ☐ **Exemption 6** – Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study's design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact the IRB to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

☒ Approved consent form/s enclosed

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